At the core of this important study is a list of contemporary picture books chosen by experienced critics in each of the fifteen countries that were members of the European Commission in 1995. There are nineteen books on the list: Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the two language communities of Belgium are regarded as different cultures. The books form The European Picture Book Collection (EPBC), designed to be read by children in primary schools throughout the EC, and possibly beyound, as part of the curriculum. The rationale for the selection proposed that each book should tell a story in pictures with minimal word text, within a specific cultural setting and reflecting 'a universal childhood theme'. To give the young readers and their teachers some awareness of European linguistic diversity, a cassette where the story is read in its original language accompanies each book. There is also a summary of the story content in English, and three ideas of how the book might be used.

This project is the brainchild of Penni Cotton, whose proposal won financial support from the Comenius chest of the EC for research involving schools. She assembled the group of book selectors in a symposium, to be followed by two more, thus creating a European network of adherents and a fund of interest and goodwill. She also supervised the trials of the collection in six English schools during 1997. Four teachers in each school volunteered to use the books for a month. The results are both interesting and important. All the teachers said they learned a lot about pictures books and about Europe. They were surprised how little their pupils understood about Europe before their encounters with the books and amazed by how much they knew afterwards. The European Committee of the International Reading Association gave the EPBC the Innovative Reading Promotion in Europe Award for 1996-7. The work continues. More reports are expected from European countries.

The avowed intent of Cotton's book, in which this project is set out in detail, is to help children in primary schools to learn more about their continental neighbours and fellow Europeans. This is not a new idea; the foundation of the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) after World War Two had the same impetus. But the activity instigated by Dr Cotton and her colleagues has shown that much more could, and should, be done to advance European cooperation. Now that the educational networks of the EC, modern transport, travel habits and communication technologies make interactive encounters more common and reading activities more generally shared, it is puzzling why important aspects of European culture in children's books are so little known. Cotton approaches this problem by illustrating the European dimension of children's books since Comenius and discussing their relevance in some detail.
For her own research on this topic, she devised, from the work of other picture book theorists, a framework for analysing the semiotic aspects of the picture books in the Collection, thus revealing by close reading the universal subtlety and art of these texts. The 'universal childhood theme' chosen is friendship. Using categories of visual codes, narrative techniques, David Lewis's taxonomy of types and her distinctions of 'thematic picture book ingredients', all of which are accompanied by clear tables and illustrations from the texts, she makes plain the rich resources of the books. Their effective use begins with the children and the teachers enjoying the stories together. There follows a detailed plan for the use of the Collection in English schools as part of the National Literacy Strategy, with a six-week plan for the 'focus on fiction' segment for Year 5. Were the pupils to read War and Peas (N Ireland), Naomh P?draig agus Crom Dubh (Ireland), Cantr'r Gwaelod (Wales), then Un jour mon prince viendra (France), and Kees en Keetje (Netherlands), they would discover how to link the words with the pictures. Then, in the meaning-making, the notion that 'foreign' languages are difficult would lessen. For that is the crux of the matter. As a literate nation we are more isolationist than we believe. Books written in English are sold in thousands all over the world, a matter of national pride. But how can we tell what others are thinking if we cannot read what they say?

Thoughtful attempts to redress the balance with good translations are damped down by economic excuses. Cotton shows the wealth and breadth of what is written for European children to read and suggests straightforward ways of approaching more of it for their learning about others, themselves and the nature of language. To make the ideas and suggestions clear, her publishers have designed a book where the contents are directly approachable by all who care to join in this enterprise.

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